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Flannery O'Connor and the Reader

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FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND THE READER

A Thesis

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

by

Kelly Haggard Beaty

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the techniques and imagery used by Flannery O'Connor to express her meaning in her short fiction. O'Connor was well aware that, as a devout Roman Catholic, she had a gulf of understanding to cross in order to get her specifically religious meaning across to a secularized society, and she utilized exaggeration and the grotesque in order to get that meaning across.

It is proposed that the fragmentation of modern society unique to the 20th century, caused by the splintering of religion (primarily Christian), is mirrored in the fragmentation of interpretive communities - groups of readers who share similar experience, knowledge and agendas. It is further proposed that among these interpretive communities there are both informed communities that have a strong knowledge of Roman Catholicism and/or O'Connor's beliefs, and non-informed communities that do not have a full understanding of Roman Catholicism or O'Connor's beliefs.

It is suggested that the very techniques O'Connor employed to make her meaning clear to her non-informed audience result in an increased distance between her meaning and that audience's understanding of it. An examination of O'Connor's short fiction is given in order to substantiate this suggestion.

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FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND THE READER

The twentieth century in America has seen an extraordinary splinterization of religion and a resultant collapse of a shared belief system. This collapse has been accompanied by the erosion of a 'common knowledge,' of a basic level of information that most people within a particular society can be assumed to possess, as well as by an increasing sceptism regarding authorities (religious, political and cultural) and "authorized" meanings. Instead of individuals looking to the Church for an 'official' interpretation of the Bible, the proliferation of religious sects has led to more personalized, even idiosyncratic, searches for meaning within the Bible. The loss of a shared belief system has its parallel in literary theory, particularly in reader-response criticism: the critic no longer looks to the author for an 'official' interpretation; at one extreme, the meaning of a work tends to be identified with the reader's response to or experience of a work; at the other, with the collective and negotiated response of groups of readers, or "interpretive communities." An interpretive community, in reader-response theory, is constituted by readers who have learned to read, or agreed to read, in a certain way, and share a similar understanding of vocabulary, connotations, symbols and themes; they share values, experiences and agendas. With the splinterization of religion and culture, these interpretive communities have also proliferated, diverging ever more as readers' backgrounds and experiences begin to vary more widely. In what Flannery O'Connor

termed a 'secularized' society, there are no longer "any mutually understood words above a certain level," (Stephens 6). The current disagreement over the meaning of the Bible, or the gospels, or particular biblical passages, have their literary critical analogs in the disputes over the meaning of secular texts. O'Connor was acutely aware of the difficulties involved for a modern Christian writer:

Well, I tell stories that frequently hinge on the things of belief, and the man of our times is certainly not a believer. When I write a novel in which the central action is baptism, I have to assume that for the general reader, or the general run of readers, baptism is a meaningless rite, and I have to arrange the action so that this baptism carries enough awe and terror to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance.

(Mullins 105)

Specifically, O'Connor was trying to overcome the loss of a shared belief system, of a readership possessing a common vocabulary. Her intent was to make the action of grace within her works recognizable on an emotional level. For reader-response critics, however, the question of "intent" is always problematical: the extent to which authorial intention should be considered has been deftly argued by Andre' Bleikasten (referring to O'Connor with the generic male pronoun):

Not that we should feel free to discount the writer's intentions, and to discard the conscious assumptions on which his work was built as irrelevant to critical inquiry. But we can dispense with his approving nods over our shoulders while we read his books. O'Connor's public

pronouncements on her art - on which most of her commentators have pounced so eagerly - are by no means the best guide to her fiction. As an interpreter, she was just as fallible as anybody else, and in point of fact there is much of what she has said or written about her work that is highly questionable. The relationship between what an author thinks, or thinks he thinks, and what he writes, is certainly worth consideration. For the critic, however, what matters most is not the extent to which O'Connor's tales and novels reflect or express her Christian faith, but rather the problematical relation between her professed ideological stance and the textual evidence of her fiction. (Bleikasten 138-139)

For Bleikasten, O'Connor has become just another reader, whose interpretation is no less fallible than that of any other reader. Indeed, even O'Connor herself recognised that

...a work of art exists without its author from the moment the words are on paper, and the more complete the work, the less important it is who wrote it or why. If you're studying literature, the intentions of the writer have to be found in the work itself, and not in his life. (O'Connor, Mystery 126)

As Bleikasten notes, "O'Connor's own works may be considered 'incomplete' by this standard, due to the problematical relationship between her ideological stance and the textual evidence," referred to by Bleikasten. This problematical relationship is caused largely by O'Connor's acute awareness of the difficulties in reaching readers outside her own interpretive community, and whose interpretation of her meaning might therefore be

different from what she intended. As a result, she deliberately employed methods aimed at bridging that distance.

Flannery O'Connor's fiction is written from the viewpoint of a devout Catholic, one who, unlike many modern, liberal, Catholics, believes firmly, for example, in the literal transubstantiation of bread and wine into Christ's flesh and blood. As a result of her devout beliefs, and the symbols and imagery she consequently employs to express her meaning, her ideal audience is an informed interpretive community that shares or at least understands her uniquely Christian point of view; less informed readers, or members of other interpretive communities may miss the full depth of meaning that she intended. For example, Eudora Welty has stated of O'Connor that

There are a lot of things I realize are a closed book to me in her work because of the Roman Catholic Church of which I'm ignorant. Certain things that I accept as symbols of the imagination are also symbols of her church, and would mean so much more to her than an ordinary reader would know about. Once I heard her speak and explain some of these things. That opened a great many doors to me and I read her work with renewed understanding. (Prenshaw 22)

Welty also states that she has "enjoyed everything [O'Connor] has done," (Prenshaw 22) which is a crucial point: O'Connor's works are still quite interesting and contain a great deal of meaning available to any reader or interpretive community, including the "ordinary" reader of which Welty speaks. O'Connor made this possible through her use of what she terms anagogical vision:

This is the way the modern novelist sinks, or hides, his theme. The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation....I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature. (O'Connor, Mystery 72)

O'Connor is referring here to the anagogical technique of interpretation generally associated with poetry or scripture, that of finding a spiritual or mystical sense beyond the literal, allegorical or moral sense of a word, passage or text ("Anagoge"). O'Connor is successful in her use of this technique, in the sense that readers of all backgrounds are able to find different levels of meaning within her works; however, she is also unsuccessful in that it is still only the informed reader, already familiar with Catholicism or interested enough to research and explore O'Connor's Catholicism, who is capable of the greater or "renewed understanding" of which Welty speaks. In effect, her deepest spiritual and mystical meaning, which is the very essence of O'Connor's prose writings, may be a closed book to Welty's ordinary, or non-informed, reader who possesses an average understanding of Christianity and those Christian symbols which remain part of common knowledge today.

O'Connor has offered many direct insights into her work, as partially reflected in "Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose" and "The Habit of Being," two compilations of

her speeches, letters and other prose referred to in this text. The informed reader must decide for himself the validity of these insights, and whether or not he wishes to consider them when interpreting the works for himself. As Robert Drake observes,

unlike some contemporary Christian writers, Miss O'Connor makes no concessions to the non-Christian world: on the whole, she refuses to make her ideology palatable to non-Christian readers by suggesting any philosophical frame of reference other than that of Christian orthodoxy....

(Drake, Flannery 14)

O'Connor was writing for a Christian audience, or more specifically, a Catholic audience, and it is that interpretive community with which she was most concerned. While her use of the anagogical serves to make her works meaningful for such readers, the non-informed reader can go only so far in understanding her works as she intended. O'Connor was clearly aware of this gap in understanding, but nonetheless felt that she could bridge that gap through her use of the grotesque;

I have to make [the reader] feel, viscerally if no other way, that something is going on here that counts. Distortion is an instrument in this case; exaggeration has a purpose....this isn't a distortion or exaggeration that destroys. (Mullins 105)

However, instead of 'jarring the reader into some kind of emotional recognition,' through this distortion, O'Connor occasionally does distort or destroy her own meaning by provoking a reading opposite from that she intended. As Ralph C. Wood points out, there exists "an implicit and deeply troubling dualism in her fiction" (Wood 99) that stems from

this use of distortion. For the ordinary reader, and even the informed reader, this distortion, usually in the form of the grotesque, makes her fiction more difficult to interpret. O'Connor frequently uses the grotesque to call attention to the action of grace in her works; however, the ordinary reader may not recognise the presence of grace in the overwhelming presence of the grotesque. The exaggeration does destroy in these cases - it destroys the reader's ability to see the action of grace in such 'viscerally' negative occurrences. No reader comes away from O'Connor's fiction without a sense of evil and dark justice, but all too often the reader is left with no sense whatsoever of the positive action of grace within her works because of the overpowering negativity of the grotesque. An informed reader, on the other hand, is much more likely to recognise the presence of grace: for example, a gruesome death by goring in "Greenleaf" (O'Connor, Complete 334) resonates in subtle allusion to the equally gruesome deaths of martyred saints in the Catholic canon - an allusion that is easily overlooked by Welty's ordinary reader. Catholicism has a rich history of gory deaths for the sake of religion, and salvation. Lacking a connection to that tradition of hard-won salvation, a non-informed reader is much less likely to recognise the presence of grace in such a shocking and sudden end.

O'Connor has stated that "in my stories a reader will find that the devil accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective" (O'Connor, Mystery 117). And indeed, the operation of the demonic is at times impossible to distinguish from that of grace in her work because they are so "disturbingly alike," and the result is that "the concept of God suggested by her work is in the last resort hardly more reassuring than her Devil" (Bleikasten 66) for the ordinary reader. The

positive action of grace works through such seemingly negative channels that the reader has great difficulty at times in distinguishing grace from damnation. O'Connor warns readers to "be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace...and not for the dead bodies" (O'Connor, Mystery 113). When confronted by the dead bodies, however, "O'Connor's advice...is hard to follow" (Giannone 46). Unfortunately, it is thus true that "many readers...come away with a sense of having undergone some overpowering psychological experience but remain unsure as to its ultimate meaning or cause" (Walters 1). The reader is repeatedly confronted by the negativity, the grotesque, that thrusts itself to the surface of O'Connor's works.

An example of this negative confrontation is "The River" (O'Connor, Complete 334). It was O'Connor's intention to emphasize spirituality and salvation in this story in which a child's spiritual growth is so ignored by the adults around him that the single religious experience he is finally exposed to touches the innermost chord of spirituality within him, leading him into the River of Life, to his salvation and his death. O'Connor states that in "The River," it is "the child's peculiar desire to find the kingdom of Christ" that represents "the working of grace" for the character (O'Connor, Mystery 116). To O'Connor's mind, the child's own basic purity of heart and soul harmonizes with this one experience and leads him directly into God's arms. Because O'Connor believes that the distortion she uses in her work reveals rather than destroys the meaning of the work to her readers (O'Connor, Mystery 162), she distorts the boy's home life into a parody of modern secularism: parents that barely seem to realize that they bear responsibility for a young life and that are evidently concerned only with themselves and their next pleasure.

She then distorts the backwoods revival into a parody of baptism: a strange young preacher stands knee high in a muddy river singing while people wander awkwardly in and out of the river around him (O'Connor Complete 164). For O'Connor, this baptismal scene serves to demonstrate that grace is available regardless of the setting, and that it is the genuine faith of the people that matters. To the reader who does not share in the Christian belief in the sanctifying powers of the baptismal ritual, however, the whole baptismal scene seems to be merely a ludicrous, warped experience incapable of resulting in true salvation for the boy. The informed reader is aware that, for O'Connor, salvation lies wherever it may be found, but for the non-informed reader the uncereemonious ceremony seems bereft of any real meaning because of the rather feeble nature of the participation: one man merely dips his hand in the water, another only wades in for a moment then out again, and a woman splashes a baby's feet with water (167). A reader who does not understand baptism finds it hard to discover the significance of baptism in these lame acts. O'Connor acknowledged that the problem of communicating to her audiences would be "difficult in direct proportion as [her] beliefs depart from" the reader's (O'Connor, Mystery 162). According to Robert Drake,

The theology is simply there - as such - and must be reckoned with. ...she has, in a sense, come to call the wicked to repentance - and none more so than the modern intellectuals who have no use for Christianity, the Church, or its traditional doctrines. And this may be what does limit her audience: she makes a crucial problem of belief. (Drake, Flannery 16)

The preacher, Bevel Summers, seems to be merely a charlatan to the 'modern intellectual,' with his claim that "if you believe, you can lay your pain in that River and get rid of it because that's the River that was made to carry sin" (O'Connor, Complete 165). To non-informed readers, this claim, and the others made by the backwoods preacher, seems to be merely the same stuff spouted by slick faith-healers and 'confidence' men. Many readers have learned to dismiss such messages as designed merely to gull or frighten the feeble-minded and uneducated into unquestioning belief in whatever belief system is being hawked by that particular 'preacher.' But although "the Southern Baptists, the Holy-Rollers may be violent or grotesque or at times even ridiculous" to the reader, for O'Connor they are undoubtedly "a whole lot nearer the truth than the more 'enlightened' but godless intellectuals or even the respectable do-gooders and church-goers" (Drake, Flannery 16). Concerning the Catholic novelist in the South, O'Connor has stated,

I think he will feel a good deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development. His interest and sympathy may very well go - as I know my own does - directly to those aspects of Southern life where the religious feeling is most intense and where its outward forms are farthest from the Catholic, and most revealing of a need that only the Church can fill.... The result of these underground religious affinities will be a strange and, to many, perverse fiction.... (O'Connor, Mystery 207)

She is correct in that this affinity does seem strange, and it serves to obscure her meaning from many of her non-informed readers. While for O'Connor, the message transcends the messenger, it is unfortunately true that often in her works "the outlandishness of [O'Connor's] characters nullifies the empathic identification which a reader might make with them" (Gossett 75), and the non-informed may easily discount the message because of its source.

In "The River," O'Connor illustrates her firm belief in the validity of salvation even if based on fear or a lack of understanding. For her, young Harry Ashfield is able to respond to the essential truth of salvation in the baptismal experience. This is "a child who makes no distinction between the physical and the unseen, the literal and the mysterious" (Giannone 73), and who tries to find a literal rather than metaphorical "Kingdom of Christ" in the river (O'Connor Complete 173). But for many readers, Harry's patent lack of true understanding renders his 'decision' invalid; Harry does not understand either the literal or the 'mysterious' consequences of his action. In the words of Robert Drake, "Miss O'Connor's Christian concerns did ultimately lose her some part of her potential audience: there is no denying this. She did...make an *issue* of Christian belief....And I myself can see no way around the limitation it imposes on her readership..." (Drake, "Paradigm" 441). Ultimately, to the non-informed or sceptical reader, the deep reverberations within the child's soul that are set up by the baptismal experience seem merely the pitiful, confused and fanciful imaginings of a woefully misinformed and unguided child. The sense of true salvation that O'Connor intended to convey in this story gets lost in the ludicrous picture of a fire and brimstone bible-thumper and his miraculous

faith healing; here as elsewhere in O'Connor, religious commitment and fervor are read as lunacy, as Dorothy Walters observes, "[b]ecause the norm is apathy, those who are zealous in their spiritual commitments are themselves labeled grotesque by an 'uninvolved' society" (32). Arguably,

O'Connor was disturbed by what she saw as the contemporary Christian's loss of spiritual consciousness. She attributed this loss mainly to increased materialism and to an unqualified acceptance of modern rationalist thought. In theory, rationalism's doctrines state that human reason, without the assistance of divine revelation, is capable of discerning religious truths. In practice, rationalists believe that reason alone can determine correct behavior. In O'Connor's orthodox Christian view, modern rationalism diluted dogma and negated the need for faith and redemption. (CLC 254)

In the baptismal scene, the only sane character, it seems to the 'rationalist' reader, is the unbeliever, Mr. Paradise, who appears to exist in order to show the people the truth about the charlatan. When Mr. Paradise shouts out "pass the hat and give this kid [Summers] his money. That's what he's here for" (O'Connor Complete 166) the contemporary Christian reader may identify with this view of the preacher, a view opposite to what O'Connor says she intended. The crux of the reader's 'misreading' lies in the fact that O'Connor's most religious characters, such as the preacher, are not rational exemplars of religious belief; nonetheless their unconventional understanding of religion is preferable in O'Connor's view to that of those who merely mouth the words of belief rather than feel them. As Andre Bleikasten puts it,

The reader is of course free to dismiss [her] characters ...as insane, and to interpret their extravagant stories as cases of religious mania, but it is clear that this is not how the author intended them to be read. As a Roman Catholic, O'Connor must have had her reservations about the fanatic intolerance and apocalyptic theology of primitive fundamentalism. Yet, as she herself admitted on several occasions, its integrity and fervor appealed to her, for she found them congenial to the burning intransigence of her own faith. (Bleikasten 58)

When Summers tells Harry, "you count now... you didn't even count before" (O'Connor, Complete 168), the ordinary reader, like Harry himself, may be shocked. It is difficult for the reader to whom baptism is a meaningless rite to feel that an innocent child 'didn't count' before baptism. This strict tenet of Christian doctrine is certainly a difficult concept to accept. Because her faith requires O'Connor to make such harsh judgments as this, "[her] stories are particularly difficult for the rationalist 'good man,' ...who will be continually challenged to define and redefine his own conception of goodness" (Baumgaertner 13). The rationalist good man finds it difficult to comprehend the good in considering a child damned for something beyond his control, as the apparent fact that Harry was not baptised by his parents is patently beyond his control.

The fundamentalists O'Connor uses in her works are neither ideal Christians nor model philosophers, but at least they believe in the mystery of being and the sacramental nature of baptism. As Harry Ashfield's epiphany demonstrates, O'Connor uses them as a medium through which the Word of God can be apprehended. It is interesting that as a

Catholic O'Connor "seems to take a grim ironic pleasure in siding *with* the Southern fundamentalists against the modern, will-ful intellectuals" (Drake, Flannery 16). This strange use of Protestantism to advance Catholic concepts of the sacrament results from O'Connor's feeling that "the fundamentalist Protestant churches were closer to Rome than they realized" (Baumgaertner 12). The fundamentalists may seem bizarre or over-the-top to the reader, but for O'Connor, their central message is more decisive than the method of communicating that message. In other words, the message transcends the messenger, no matter how odd that messenger may seem. The ordinary reader may easily miss that level of consonance between Protestant and Catholic beliefs, between the fundamentalist's message and the fundamental message, that is a critical assumption in this particular work. As Bleikasten has observed, "[f]or O'Connor's Christomaniacs...their notion of the godly is not exempted from the distortions of the corrupt world in which they live, and therefore the divine gets so often confused with the demonic" (Bleikasten 59-60). What the non-informed reader does see in "The River" are ludicrously misbegotten 'Christians' that seem to make a mockery of religion. O'Connor has said that "[t]he things that bind us together as Catholics are known only to ourselves. A secular society understands us less and less. It becomes more and more difficult in America to make belief believable" (O'Connor, Mystery 201), and she seems to be correct.

Later in "The River," when Mr. Paradise, the character that the ordinary reader sees as a solitary voice of reason in the wilderness, tries to distract Harry to save him from drowning, the reader feels more horror at the thought of a young life lost than at the pointed "giant pig" and "ancient water monster" descriptions of Mr. Paradise (O'Connor,

Complete 174). That Harry mistakes his would-be savior for a giant pig bounding after him seems pathetic. That this earthly savior is further described as a water monster is far less significant to the reader than the fact that he is attempting to save Harry's life.

O'Connor intends the monster image to be repugnant, but the drowning is more so to the contemporary Christian reader. The triumphal ending, in which "drowning into salvation is preferable to life in the midst of corruptions" (Walters 74), is lost to this reader in a reaction of pity and dismay as Mr. Paradise stands empty-handed, "staring with his dull eyes as far down the river line as he could see" (O'Connor, Complete 174). The reader, like Mr. Paradise, has lost hope for the child.

For O'Connor, Mr. Paradise is an ineffective, ridiculous figure, but the contemporary Christian reader sees him in a different light, sharing in Mr. Paradise's hope that Harry could be saved, in the literal sense, rather than appreciating O'Connor's view that the child is now Saved, in the Christian sense (Walters 74). Indeed,

the lesson is a difficult one for the modern reader to accept, for the question inevitably arises as to whether or not one can be sure that the act carries significance beyond that of the futile destruction of an unfortunate child-victim. Once again, salvation seems to carry a rather high price tag; but, in the author's eyes at least, redemption is well worth the cost.

(Walters 76)

To O'Connor, "no conscious act of suicide is committed" (Walters 76), but that point is lost on the non-informed; the loss of life is paramount. Although O'Connor has stated that Harry "hasn't reached the age of reason; therefore he can't commit suicide. He

comes to a good end. He's saved from those nutty parents, a fate worse than death. He's been baptized and so he goes to his Maker; this is a good end" (Fugin 58), the modern sceptical reader questions whether this is truly a good end. It is obvious that Harry thinks that the river is literally the path to the Kingdom of Christ, as does O'Connor, but he doesn't seem to understand that death is a necessary corollary to the path that he has chosen. For O'Connor, he was merely following the sacramental path to God as he understood it; salvation does not require full understanding. She says in the story that Harry "intended not to fool with preachers anymore but to Baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river. He didn't mean to waste any more time" (O'Connor, Complete 173). This a clear statement indicating her belief that his salvation is achieved. But despite the fact that in O'Connor's eyes a misguided child drawn into the River of Life and the arms of God is saved, to the less devout mind the child is stumbling, if you will, into the river of death, thus losing his chance to learn more about God and life and to appreciate what comfort religion has to give in this life. A reader not fully conversant with the nuances of religious salvation sees merely that "understanding may not inform the experience at all" (Giannone 71). Consequently, "what is being done with the utmost seriousness seems terribly naive, or simple-minded, to the reader" (Hoffman 33). The child Harry's response is an emotional one, or instinctual. In O'Connor's world, religion is emotional and instinctual, and the leap of faith deeply valued. Harry's death is that leap taken literally, and is religiously satisfying to the devout. O'Connor is clearly interested in such characters, those "who act on a trust beyond themselves - whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not," but "[t]o the

modern mind, this kind of character, and his creator, are typical Don Quixotes, tilting at what is not there" (O'Connor, Mystery 42). The secularized response is to feel that "the autonomy of Flannery O'Connor's [character] is violated... because [his] free will is overwhelmed by the divine will" (Wood 99). Further, in an age of doubt and questioning, the firm belief inherent in O'Connor's interpretation of the story, that the child goes to God, is subject to misapprehension; did the child merely extinguish his own light, or is he in fact with God? The reader who does not share O'Connor's particular Christian beliefs is unable to make that leap of faith with Harry and trust in the apparent fact of his salvation.

The Mr. Paradise character is often misread by the ordinary reader as well. He exemplifies the modern rationalist, who to O'Connor is mis-leading those who would follow God through seemingly reasonable arguments. Mr. Paradise in this sense represents the presence of the devil in the modern world. O'Connor states, "I have found my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil...an evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy" (O'Connor, Mystery 118). But in using Mr. Paradise to demonstrate the machinations of the devil, O'Connor confuses and misleads many readers. Instead of showing that the path to God can make many and various detours, and that the incautious follower may be led astray through the machinations of such men as Mr. Paradise, she makes the modern reader doubt that the path exists within "The River" at all. The arguments of Mr. Paradise, which were designed to show the clear and present danger of a rationalist perspective, do indeed

distract a portion of her readers, who are used to viewing the motives of fundamentalists as suspect. As Claire Katz argues:

It would seem that for O'Connor, given the fact of Original Sin, any intelligence determined on its own supremacy was intrinsically evil. For in each work, it is the impulse toward secular autonomy, the strong confidence that human nature is perfectible by its own efforts, that she sets out to destroy, through an act of violence so intense that the character is rendered helpless, a passive victim of superior power. Again and again she creates a fiction in which a character attempts to live autonomously, to define himself and his values, only to be jarred back to what she calls "reality"...the need for absolute submission to the power of Christ. (Katz 55-56)

Mr. Paradise is that character bent on secular autonomy, who for O'Connor has been jarred back to reality by the drowning of a little boy.

In "Greenleaf," Mrs. May, another character bent on secular autonomy, is jarred back to reality by the circumstances of her own death. O'Connor has portrayed her as an exaggerated version of a type: a middle class country woman full of pride, racism and classism. She seems rather typical, in fact. What the informed reader must keep in mind, however, is that pride is one of the seven deadly sins, and O'Connor is not an author who allows such sins to go unpunished. Mrs. May, unlike Harry in "The River," is a grown woman capable of making her own choice for salvation; indeed, she considers herself a "good Christian woman" (O'Connor, Complete 316). O'Connor paints a clear picture of

Mrs. May's state of damnation, however, by finishing that description: "a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true" (O'Connor, Complete 316). Here is an adult who, at heart, has rejected God and his teachings, and who is ultimately, like Mr. Paradise, helpless in the face of fate. For contrast, O'Connor illustrates for the reader yet another fanatical, fundamentalist character, Mrs. Greenleaf. Mrs. Greenleaf indulges in prayer healing:

every day she cut all the morbid stories out of the newspaper... she took these to the woods and dug a hole and buried them and then she fell on the ground over them and mumbled and groaned for an hour or so moving her huge arms back and forth under her and out again and finally just lying down flat. (O'Connor, Complete 315-316)

This image is a very unattractive one, from the morbid stories to the 'huge arms' moving back and forth. Here again, O'Connor uses distortion and the grotesque to call the reader's attention to the working of grace within her fiction. The ordinary reader does feel, on a visceral level, that something important is going on in this scene. But Mrs. Greenleaf is so uncomfortably fanatical, so bizarre, in fact, that the reader cannot identify with her, and may easily reject O'Connor's premise: that the essential sacramental quality of Mrs. Greenleaf's beliefs and genuine Christian concern for others transcends her method of worship. Granville Hicks points out that

O'Connor's sympathies lie more with these characters than with the smug and confident Christians of their society. In her view, spiritual

consciousness is, regardless of its distortions, battling for life in a world that has become spiritually numb. (Hicks 162-163)

But here again, O'Connor's message is overshadowed by the messenger because of her use of distortion. The informed reader, while aware that O'Connor sees Mrs. Greenleaf as spiritually superior to Mrs. May because of her true religious commitment, still tends to secretly agree with Mrs. May's assessment of Mrs. Greenleaf as 'white trash,' if only because of O'Connor's description of the large, filthy Greenleaf family and "dump" of a yard (O'Connor, Complete 315). This description, along with the description of Mrs. Greenleaf's form of worship, repulses even the most accepting of readers. Indeed,

[i]n their appalling extravagance, these ritual actions are likely to shock any reader, whether Christian or not. But here again, if we are prepared to accept the premises of the author, we shall avoid mistaking them for mere fits of madness, for to her, in a desacralized world like ours, these savage and sacrilegious rites paradoxically assert the presence of the sacred through the very excess of its distortion or denial. (Bleikasten 138-139)

If we are prepared to accept O'Connor's premises and be her kind of reader, we will find that Mrs. Greenleaf is actually to be admired. But it is difficult for most to ignore the excesses of her zeal. There is a parallel between the nature of O'Connor's beliefs and the nature of belief as portrayed within her writings: true faith is never easy, and neither is accepting O'Connor's religious characters as positive role models. O'Connor's religious characters such as Mrs. Greenleaf and the preacher from "The River" are so distorted as to

strike us as ironic[;]parodic overtones are so frequent that the [work] might almost be read as sheer burlesque....[because] O'Connor's penchant for travesty is likewise reflected in the eccentric ritualism of many of her characters: baptismal drownings...rites of exorcism...purification rites...initiation rites...sacrificial rites...etc. (Bleikasten 138-139)

The fact that "the *expression* of such commitment [as Mrs. Greenleaf's] is often highly comic" (Walters 32) works against O'Connor as she develops the contrast between Mrs. Greenleaf and Mrs. May. For O'Connor, "grotesque characters, comic though they may be, are at least not primarily so. They seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity" (O'Connor, Mystery 44). But that reproach is a difficult one to recognise when it comes from such an odd source. As Caroline Gordon states, "[O'Connor's] characters, move always in the harsh glare of every day. But they, too, are warped and misshapen by life - in short, freaks" (Gordon 5). The modern reader is much more in sympathy with the superficially rational character, Mrs. May in this case, despite her narrow-minded prejudices. She appears to be a more reliable character than Mrs. Greenleaf just because she seems almost normal. For O'Connor, however, Mrs. Greenleaf is "a sympathetic character" whose "self-donation...bespeak[s]...an unusual love" (Giannone 170-172).

Although the reader may not fully agree with Mrs. May's point of view, Mrs. Greenleaf's "passion" is so "obscene" (Giannone 170) that the reader tends still to prefer Mrs. May over her. Mrs. May's obvious class prejudices and narrow-mindedness are off-putting, as shown for example, in what she thinks about the Greenleaf boys: "they had

both joined the service and, disguised in their uniforms, they could not be told from other people's children" (O'Connor, Complete 318). Nonetheless the reader still has no reason to see Mrs. Greenleaf in a better light. What the informed reader eventually realises is that

Mrs. May, like many of the O'Connor widow-divorcees, has really thought to justify herself by her works. ...but, Miss O'Connor implies, religion is not for "moderates," it does warp one - away from the ways of this world. The final irony remains that it is really the hard-working but prideful Mrs. May who is really warped. And it is such *hubris* which appears the cardinal sin in Miss O'Connor's works. (Drake, "Bleeding" 190-191)

O'Connor states that her stories are primarily about people such as Mrs. May, "who have .. little - or at best a distorted - sense of spiritual purpose" (O'Connor, Mystery 32). But despite Mrs. May's obvious negative qualities, next to Mrs. Greenleaf she seems relatively normal to the average reader. That, of course, is O'Connor's point. Such 'normal' individuals as Mr. Paradise and Mrs. May are critically dangerous to society in her eyes, since their sins seem so normal, and their rationalizations are reasonable enough as to turn others away from the path of the righteous. As O'Connor puts it: "[t]he novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him and his problems will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural" (O'Connor, Mystery 162). Mr. Paradise's and Mrs. May's very reasonableness is what makes them, if not actually evil, a serious threat to the easily misled. The non-informed reader may identify too closely with and be misled by these

very 'reasonable' characters within the framework of O'Connor's stories, making the denouement that much more horrifying.

In O'Connor's works, "[m]etaphor is almost always deeply imbedded in the factual narrative, but there are times when the symbols become detached and seem to be indulged for their own horrendous sake" (Simons 19). As such, Mrs. May's violent death from a bull goring seems to be an overly harsh punishment for the woman's jealousy and pride. The reader does feel a sense of grim and ironic justice in that the one who, prompted by petty emotions, decreed an unjust death for an innocent animal should be killed by that same animal. The fact that O'Connor's "most potent scenes rely on the impact, comic and pathetic, inherent in the nightmare reality of her situations suggests that the nature of her talent often distorted the explicitly theological concerns that inform her work" (Baumbach 87) and causes problems for the non-informed reader. The climactic final scene is again ambiguous, even more so than in "The River." Mrs. May "had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable" (O'Connor, Complete 333); does the fact that she finds the light unbearable mean that she is not, after all, Saved? O'Connor states that this is the moment in "Greenleaf" in which "the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected [by Mrs. May], even though the reader may not recognize this moment" (O'Connor, Mystery 118). Arguably, even the non-Christian reader cannot help recognizing the presence of grace in the familiar metaphor of restored sight, but the real question remains: has Mrs. May accepted it? As for the bull, which from its earlier description as wearing a "hedge-wreath" resembling a "prickly crown" (O'Connor, Complete 311, 312) is clearly meant to represent Christ, its murderous attack

on Mrs. May is particularly difficult to interpret. Richard Giannone argues, "even a reader who is sympathetic to the spiritual thrust of "Greenleaf" finds the ending ambiguous" (Giannone 167). If the reader is not sympathetic, the ending seems to be unnecessarily violent. O'Connor, however,

quietly insists on viewing death, however horrible and violent, from the perspective of eternity. If the reader resists this view, there will seem to be no moral emotional resolutions to her stories: only the arbitrary, violent, and meaningless "resolution" of an equally arbitrary, violent, and meaningless death. (Vande Kieft 337)

And even the reader that does not resist O'Connor's perspective may have problems with the ending:

O'Connor would have us believe that her protagonists are responsible for their fates, that they possess freedom of choice, and are at liberty to refuse or accept their vocation...but her readers, even those who sympathize with her Christian assumptions and are willing to make allowances for the mysterious working of grace, will hesitate to take her at her word....Her heroes are not allowed to shape their destinies: they only *recognize* fate when it pounces upon them. (Bleikasten 62)

Mrs. May is given little chance to shape her destiny: she is gored, she sees the light, and she dies. Again, as with Harry, the reader sees no thought processes, no intelligent choice, nothing leading the character of Mrs. May to her salvation. Instead, we see merely a self-centered, smug woman who is shockingly and suddenly gored to death. Even in terms of

the argument that such a violent death has resonance in light of the rich history of religious martyrs, Mrs. May's death is still equivocal inasmuch as she has made no stand for her religion, and even seems to lack any real religion prior to her death. Thus her violent end is not in response to any held belief, but rather the lack of belief. The informed reader may feel confidence in Mrs. May's salvation, but the ordinary reader may find Mrs. May's ultimate conversion questionable. Although O'Connor stated that "for the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction" (O'Connor, Mystery 73), she writes stories in which the experience, the meaning, can be vastly different according to the experiences and beliefs of the reader.

Another work in which the meaning can be vastly different for each reader is "The Displaced Person" (O'Connor, Complete 194). In "The Displaced Person," there is again a Mrs. May-type character, Mrs. McIntyre, who is bent on secular autonomy, but who this time is jarred back to reality by the circumstances of another's death. Mrs. McIntyre is also a middle class country woman full of pride, racism and classism, and stands in danger of eternal damnation. However, in this work O'Connor uses a Catholic priest for foil against Mrs. McIntyre instead of one of her exaggeratedly fanatical, fundamentalist characters. What is most surprising is that O'Connor, a devout Catholic, develops the character of the priest in such a way that he takes on a rather negative aspect. In this case, there are no overtly bizarre actions performed by the character, but rather a puzzling lack of action that seems to make the priest an unknowing contributor to the eventual death of Mr. Guizac, the Displaced Person. It is this lack of action that confuses even the informed reader when Mrs. McIntyre, admittedly a rather narrow-minded, prejudiced character,

nonetheless reaches out to the priest for assistance and receives none. Mrs. McIntyre talks to the priest about the displaced person, but "she and the priest talk at cross purposes" (Baumgaertner 71): she states that Mr. Guizac "doesn't fit in" and the priest responds only that "he'll learn to fit in" and in the same breath continues, "where is that beautiful birrrrd of yours?" (O'Connor, Complete 225). He shows no real concern about the situation, and very little connection to worldly affairs at all. Indeed, the priest "seems barely aware of the literal features of experience" (Walters 123). In essence, Mrs. McIntyre experiences a rejection from Father Flynn that mirrors her own rejection of faith; as Caroline Gordon puts it,

In Miss O'Connor's vision of modern man - a vision not limited to Southern rural humanity - all her characters are "displaced persons," not merely the people in the story of that name. They are "off center," out of place, because they are victims of a rejection of the Scheme of Redemption. (Gordon 9-10)

In O'Connor's vision, her characters are either unable or unwilling to recognise their own need for redemption, and are therefore 'displaced' in the eyes of God. Mrs. McIntyre has passively rejected Redemption as espoused by the Church: she suffers from the unrecognized cardinal sin of pride. When she seeks the assistance of the Church, in the person of Father Flynn, she in turn seems to experience rejection. However, Father Flynn's thoughts are on the transcendent, the eternal, rather than on the temporal problems of his parishioners. When he offers no practical solution to the problem Mrs. McIntyre brings to him, the modern reader is tempted to see her as being rejected by the Church, but

the informed reader, on the other hand, understands O'Connor's conceit that the priest is ultimately concerned with Mrs. McIntyre's eternal soul, which would not be saved by the removal of the displaced persons, or by the consequent removal of the priest's excuse for his ministering visits. In this sense, Mr. Guizac represents the presence of grace, the possibility of redemption, for Mrs. McIntyre. The priest's failure to remove the Guizacs represents the continued possibility for Mrs. McIntyre to find redemption. Alternately, when Mr. Guizac, who might have been moved safely out of harm's way by the intercession of the priest, remains in what ultimately proves to be mortal danger, it seems to the non-informed reader to be attributable as much to the Father's failure to address his need as to the individuals who more consciously allow the death to occur in an avoidable accident. Mrs. McIntyre wants concrete suggestions or assistance to deal with the problems of the here and now, not assistance in dealing with the hereafter. What the non-informed reader may be unaware of is that O'Connor sees the death of Mr. Guizac, like the death of Christ, as necessary to bring her other characters to 'reality' and to offer them redemption:

in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world.

(O'Connor, Mystery 112)

The cost seems to be very considerable in "The Displaced Person." Even given O'Connor's intended meaning, the reader has to ask whether it really is God's will that a man is killed, and his family's future destroyed, in order to orchestrate the salvation of one prideful woman? O'Connor introduces Mr. Guizac as a Christ-like figure, but instead of dying for all mankind's sins, Mr. Guizac is condemned to die for the sins of one woman.

The "casual" reader, unaware of O'Connor's deep faith, or unable to share it, can easily misread this story as an indictment of the Catholic Church. An informed reader can also read the message to be that the Church's concerns are limited, and insufficient to assuage the real needs of these people. O'Connor, however, is unlikely to have penned such an indictment of the Church; it is more likely that O'Connor meant the priest to represent the presence of grace: awaiting only the individual's self-discovery and repentance to be granted. To the casual reader, however, Father Flynn seems simply to represent the failure of the Catholic Church to tend to the present needs of humanity through its all-consuming concern with the spiritual state of mankind. The priest becomes a negative figure to this reader, when he ignores the obvious need of the Guizacs. The inability of the priest and Mrs. McIntyre to communicate well with each other seems to figure a breakdown in communication between the Church and its public. As Robert Drake comments, "at one point there is even an ironic - and characteristic - breakdown of communication between Mrs. McIntyre and the priest" (Drake, Flannery 27) when she speaks of Mr. Guizac and he, contemplating the peacock, speaks of Christ: "'He didn't have to come in the first place,' she repeated, emphasizing each word. The old man smiled absently. 'He came to redeem us,' he said and blandly reached for her hand and

shook it and said he must go” (O’Connor, Complete 226). O’Connor intends this scene to clearly delineate Mr. Guizac’s role as redeemer/savior for Mrs. McIntyre, but the reader may be distracted by the inexplicable fact that the priest is patently not paying attention to what Mrs. McIntyre is saying. The priest is an ineffective moral force in the story, too busy contemplating a peacock's display to notice more worldly problems.

The casual reader may not understand the priest's fascination with the peacock. The peacock may seem to represent pride, and the priest's absorption in it, to the point of ignoring Mrs. McIntyre's complaints, seems unaccountable. However, the peacock is symbolically resonant for O’Connor, and is a powerful emblem in her Church:

because of its firm flesh, which was thought not to decay, the peacock appears often in iconography as a symbol of the Resurrection, particularly when its feathers are spread. In addition, the "eyes" in the feathers were thought to represent either God's omniscience or the Church's eternal presence. (Baumgaertner 65)

What is confusing to the non-informed reader is that, “instead of being associated with human pride and ostentatiousness, the peacock becomes a symbol of the Second Coming” (Bleikasten 68) in “The Displaced Person.” The possibility of the ‘wrong’ reading here - the reader seeing the peacock as an earthly reflection and extension of Mrs. McIntyre’s overweening pride and self-satisfaction - seems almost inevitable.

When Mrs. McIntyre tells Father Flynn point blank that "Mr. Guizac is not satisfactory" (O’Connor, Complete 225), the reader feels that the priest should either offer to find another place for the family to work, or try to talk to Mrs. McIntyre of their

common humanity and deep need for help and understanding. However, "the priest... is still thinking of the peacock and not really concentrating on Mrs. McIntyre's words" (Baumgaertner 72): "the old man didn't seem to hear her. His attention was fixed on the cock" (O'Connor, Complete 226). Since the significance of the peacock is lost to all but the most informed readers, the priest's absorption becomes that much more inexplicable in the face of human need. This results in a backlash of resentment, though vague, towards the priest, and even before the 'accident' the reader is conscious of a seeming lack of real concern on the part of Father Flynn. Once again, the reader reacts negatively against the very character who is intended to represent the continuing possibility of salvation within O'Connor's story.

After the accident, when Mrs. McIntyre is even more in need of salvation as a result of her complicity in the death of Mr. Guizac, the priest returns: "he came regularly once a week with a bag of breadcrumbs and, after he had fed these to the peacock, he would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church" (O'Connor, Complete 235). It seems to the reader at this point that the priest places as much stress, or more, on the nourishment of the peacock's physical being as on the nourishment of Mrs. McIntyre's soul. Indeed, there seems to be a particular ironic significance to the bread crumbs; they imply that all he has to give to Mrs. McIntyre are crumbs as well. In the face of Mrs. McIntyre's incapacity, she having lost her voice and most of her vision to "declining health" after the accident (O'Connor, Complete 235), the priest continues his visits, and though this curiously one-sided catechizing would not seem to be effective, supposedly her "liminal [sic] hearing suffices for his weekly oral

instruction" (Giannone 112). It seems to be a rather grim picture, as one can imagine Mrs. McIntyre's inability to prevent the catechizing should she not wish to hear it. But for O'Connor, this evidence of the presence of grace outweighs all other considerations, "[f]or certainly O'Connor's Christian faith was as grim and literalistic, as joyless and loveless a faith, at least as we confront it in her fiction, as we have ever seen in American letters - even, perhaps, in American theology" (Stephens 41). But O'Connor believed that "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Essentially, her view is that the priest's ministrations are effective by virtue of the power of the words to work upon the soul, and to O'Connor the presence of the priest serves as a symbol of Mrs. McIntyre's salvation despite her collusion in the death of Mr. Guizac. Her intention is for the continuation of the priest's visits to represent Mrs. McIntyre's salvation by implying that grace is still possible for her through the priest's ministrations. His presence parallels the presence of God; the sinner is not forsaken. But the modern reader sees only an old priest, patiently feeding the crumbs of his faith to a possibly unwilling recipient, who might have been 'saved' both from contributing to Mr. Guizac's death and from suffering the physical manifestations of her guilty conscience by more timely ministrations of the priest. For yet another of O'Connor's characters, "spiritual conversion is accomplished...through a staggering if not annihilating shock" (Bleikasten 152).

Even without her troubling use of the grotesque, O'Connor's insistence upon an unbendingly Catholic interpretation of her works serves to alienate a good portion of her readers by limiting their ability to understand her meanings. Essentially,

Miss O'Connor's themes and her presentation of them, though unique in contemporary American fiction, would seem inevitably to deny her the widest audience, even among the most genuinely sophisticated readers.

Often, with the best will in the world, such readers will simply not be able to accept her uncompromising theological frame of reference: some tension in that quarter seems unavoidable. (Drake, "Bleeding" 195-196)

That tension prevents most readers from fully participating in O'Connor's fiction and represents an apparently insurmountable gap in understanding between the author and at least part of her audience. O'Connor anticipated that gap, and attempted to bridge it through her use of violence and the grotesque:

[writers] who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable....the reason for this attention to the perverse is the difference between their beliefs and the beliefs of their audience. (Hicks 162)

Nevertheless, her use of the perverse often distracts from her stated purpose.

Ambiguity is the very hallmark of O'Connor's fiction, as the varied responses to it attest. Alice Walker illustrates an extreme case when she says of O'Connor, "it mattered to her that she was a Catholic. This comes as a surprise to those who first read her work as that of an atheist" (Walker 104). The very fact that O'Connor can be and has been misread as an atheist exemplifies the fundamental difficulty of her works. There exists a deep negativity in her use of distortion and the grotesque that engulfs, in particular, the

'movement of grace' which typifies her short stories. According to Dorothy Walters, that negativity results from

a vision which is predominantly Christian but which carries pronounced undertones of something quite dissimilar...despite her insistence on purpose, grace, and redemption as essential keys in the interpretation of human experience, a contrary implication thrusts itself constantly to the surface of her work. Ultimately, this recurring negative impulse suggests a universe more demonic than angelic. (Walters 23)

As O'Connor was aware, the problem she faced as a novelist who wished to write "about a man's encounter with his God" was how she could make "understandable, and credible" for her readers that experience "which is both natural and supernatural" (O'Connor, Mystery 161). Indeed,

[t]his is a sort of religiosity that is difficult for modern, secular people to understand and appreciate; it goes against the grain not only of the more obvious kind of rationalistic secularism ... but against all of the best in liberal Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant. In her work, evil is pervasive, substantial, in a way reminiscent of Dostoevsky. ...Violence, evil, battle, passion - the extremes - are integral to her vision. God and Christ *fight* for the human soul. (TeSelle 164)

The grotesque catches the attention of the reader, as intended, but serves more to distract from the essential action of grace than to amplify it for her audience. Her extreme devoutness obscures her intent for her non-informed audience through the ascetic nature

of her beliefs. Again and again O'Connor bends her fiction to match her beliefs, striving to reach an audience which may not fully understand her. O'Connor felt that she was writing on a level understandable to all readers:

One of the Christian novelist's basic problems is that he is trying to get the Christian vision across to an audience to whom it is meaningless....

Nevertheless, he can't write only for a select few. His work will have to have value on the dramatic level, the level of truth recognizable by anybody. (Wells 87)

In this sense, O'Connor is correct in that her work does have value on a dramatic level, but the modern reader still may miss, or misinterpret, her "recognizable" truth, mostly because of her controversial use of violence and the grotesque to illustrate that truth. Because of the splinterization of religion, and the loss of a shared belief system, O'Connor faced the daunting task of writing for potential audiences whose beliefs might be vastly different from her own. Her work is both a reflection of and challenge to the contemporary religious scene. Although much of her message may get lost, even ordinary readers, like Eudora Welty, may still enjoy O'Connor's works.

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